

**Unlocked Doors to a New World:**  
**The Muslim Community of Belleville, Illinois**

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Before any federal inquiries of September 11, 2001, began, and even before clean-up efforts started at Ground Zero, many Americans were asking the question, "Who can we trust?" For a while, Americans were searching for this answer. In the oblivion of their minds, prejudices were formed and misconceptions were condoned. But as the smoke cleared, Lady Liberty still held her torch high in the air, and the words of Emma Lazarus rang true. The symbol of freedom provided many Americans with new attitudes, and new questions. Americans began to research into the religion of Islam, which resulted in many understanding more about Muslim culture. Unfortunately, it took a tragedy to develop a complete understanding between the two sides. September 11, 2001, was the day that not only united a nation, but united the city of Belleville.

On the outskirts of Belleville, near the Belleville line, in St. Clair County, is a white brick building with a golden dome. The building, secluded by trees, is modest with no fancy windows, large billboards, or lighted symbols. It is a place of worship known as The Mosque and Islamic Education Center of Belleville. Home to Metro-East Muslims since 1999, the center currently serves over 50 families. The building has become a unique feature in the Belleville community, and it does its part to bring unity to the city by promoting peace, harmony, and interaction between Muslims and other denominations.

Although a major factor in community relations now, the Mosque almost did not make it off the drawing board. The actual construction of the Mosque faced criticism and opposition

before any building began on the site. Local residents, with a negative predisposition towards Muslims feared that there would be unwanted violence in their community. The five Metro-East Muslim visionaries of the Mosque, Mohammed Kibria, Dr. Abdul Kazi, Dr. Anwar Khan, Dr. M. Khalid, and a Mahmood, were almost forced to take legal action. Finally, after hearing the Muslims' vision of peace in the community, local residents dropped all pending objections to the building, and construction began in 1996. Six years later, the men that were instrumental in the creation of the Mosque are now the leaders of the Muslim community.

One must understand that the Muslim people are very hesitant to talk about their experiences and lifestyle in the wake of the terrorist attacks in both America and the Middle East. Instead, two of the Mosque's visionaries served as spokespersons for Metro-East Muslims for the purpose of this paper. Mohammed Kibria is the President of the Mosque and Islamic Education Center of Belleville. He also teaches at Southwestern Illinois College in Belleville. The other visionary, Dr. Abdul Kazi, is a thoracic surgeon in Belleville.

The story of Mohammed Kibria begins in India in the late 1940s. His parents migrated to Bengal in 1947 because of religious persecution of Muslims. Bengal, which later became East Pakistan, is where Kibria spent his days as a youth. Luckily, he was raised by an affluent family. He and his siblings still followed the strict code of the *Quran*, which is the Islamic equivalent to the *Bible*. It is a code of conduct that prohibits any unhealthy actions, and sets standards for conduct, dress, and interaction.

Kibria described the educational system of East Pakistan, making it appear much like that of America's. Children attend school from kindergarten through high school, and those fortunate enough attend college. Only the most prominent or promising children get an educational opportunity to attend school in America or Great Britain. One major difference that Kibria pointed out was that special religious educators often came to his home to teach him and his

siblings the *Quran*. Because of his family's affluence, Kibria would have been given the opportunity to study abroad in Great Britain.

Unfortunately, a civil war had just begun in Pakistan, and Kibria's family felt that it was best that he leave the country sooner than they had planned. However, authorities quickly learned of Kibria's plan to leave Pakistan. A government edict allowed no one to leave East Pakistan because of the invasion and authorities headed to Kibria's house to prevent his escape. Fortunately, by the time they arrived, Kibria had already been smuggled by his father onto a plane bound for Great Britain. While looking for Kibria, however, the authorities shot and killed his brother. It is not known whether the shooting was accidental or intentional.

After arriving in England, Kibria attended Cambridge University and studied English, which enabled him to speak five languages: English, Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, and Arabic. Other students who fled Pakistan also came to Great Britain, partially because Pakistan was part of the British Commonwealth of Nations, and partly because the British government was willing to board Pakistani students.

In the latter part of 1969, Kibria received a letter from his life-long good friend who asked him to come to America. His friend was attending Southern Illinois University in Carbondale and asked Kibria to join him. Unfortunately, Kibria's country of East Pakistan had become Bangladesh. Because Kibria could not claim that he was East Pakistani or Bangladeshi, he could not apply for citizenship. "I was a man without a country," said Kibria. Instead of gaining citizenship, Kibria became a residential alien. Years later, he finally received his citizenship.

He described his first years while living in southern Illinois as difficult. Not many Muslims were coming to the United States, much less to southern Illinois, at this time, and once here his main contacts were Muslim. Weather was also different than what he was used to.

Before coming to Illinois, Kibria had not seen snow. He had difficulty with the language because of the various slang terms and dialects used. In spite of these difficulties, Kibria continued to study diligently, for he knew that his parents expected him to come back to Bangladesh when his studies were finished.

In the winter of 1969, Kibria was notified that he had received a student-assistantship in sociology at Southern Illinois University in Edwardsville (SIUE). He arrived in the Metro-East region on January 3, 1970. One of the first things that he noticed about the area was the generosity of the people who always seemed to go out of their way to help the often confused foreign student. During this time, Kibria lived in Belleville with Mr. and Mrs. Jack Abens, his host family. At SIUE, Kibria played soccer, was a Who's Who Among American College Students, served as the Assistant Director of the Student Union, and was the first president of the International Student Association. In his spare time, Kibria often talked at Belleville high schools about his country and religion, and the importance for diversity. After receiving a degree in sociology, Kibria married, and took a job with the Missouri Department of Mental Health. His wife was originally an Italian Catholic who converted to Islam after attending prayer sessions with Kibria. "She discovered the beauty of Islam," Kibria said. He and his wife have two children. Currently, the Kibrias live in Belleville. Aside from his duties as the President of the Mosque, Kibria also teaches at Southwestern Illinois College in Belleville.

Another important visionary is Dr. Abdul Kazi. He was born in Pakistan in 1944, and had a childhood similar to that of Kibria's. Before coming to America, Dr. Kazi also lived in Great Britain for one and a half years. Dr. Kazi came with his wife to the United States in 1973. He had several friends that were physicians, and since that was the career he was interested in, he believed it would be a good opportunity for his practice.

His first impressions of America were somewhat different from those of Kibria's. Dr. Kazi felt that there were some differences and similarities between the United States, England, and Pakistan. Of course, he said that one of the main differences was the advanced technology that the United States had compared to Pakistan. In 1980, he moved to the Belleville area for his practice and still resides there with his wife. They have four children, two of whom are also studying to become physicians.

Although the aforementioned men are only two members of a growing population of Muslims in the Metro-East area, as leaders in their Mosque, their opinions reflect those of other Muslims who attend the Mosque. Although the number of Muslims living in the Belleville area seems small, the fact is that one-fifth of the world's population is Muslim.

Muslims live their lives under a set of laws written in the *Quran*. This holy book states that all Muslims must pray five times a day, and if possible, these prayers should be done at a Mosque. They cleanse themselves before prayer and take off their shoes as a sign of respect to themselves and most importantly, to their god, Allah. The religion of Islam has a strict ethical code. Muslims cannot eat pork, only kosher meat. No alcohol, sexuality, or affection in public is permitted. Although most Metro-East Muslim women drive, in some countries, such as Saudi Arabia, women are forbidden to do this. If possible, Muslims are also expected to give two and one half percent of their total income, if possible.

Since 1945, there have not been any major influx of immigration of Muslims to the Belleville area. Instead of coming in large groups as in the case of other immigrant groups, Muslims have arrived individually, or in very small groups, and began their families from there.

Muslims have the highest per capita income of any group of people living in the United States. This is due to the expectations placed on them by their families. Most of the Muslims living in the Belleville area work as physicians, engineers, scientists, and in managerial

positions. Unlike other ethnic groups and religions in Belleville which settled in compact groups, Muslims are spread throughout the city. They live with conjoined families, a practice that is now changing.

There are several reasons why many Muslims have come to the Belleville area. However, both visionaries agree on one thing. The Belleville area attracts Muslims because it is filled with opportunity, friends, need for professionals, and supportive people.

After the terrorist attacks on America, many local Muslims now find that people are more inquisitive about Islam. "It works out pretty well, people ask you questions, and people want to know more about the religion," Dr. Kazi said. Although many local Muslims were somewhat timid after the attacks, Kibria stated that fear soon ended because of the support that Muslims received from the Belleville community. "A lot of people do not think that life as a Muslim is the same, but it is. It has affected all of us in some way, economically and emotionally, especially," Dr. Kazi said.

Many Metro-East Muslims believe that their main goal is to keep educating people about the truth regarding Muslims. In the community of Belleville, Illinois, that mission operates smoothly. Muslim immigrants to the city have done their share to make Belleville prosper both economically, and socially. Residents are not afraid to interact with those who may have different beliefs and customs. They are now the ones following the proverb, "Never judge a book by its cover." Why? The answer is simple. Those who may be different and those we may have predispositions about may be the ones to lend a helping hand in times of need. They may be a leader in the community, or they just may be a friend.

[From student historian's interview with Dr. Abdul Kazi, Sept. 9, 2002; student historian's interview with Mohammed Kibria, Aug. 25, 2002.]